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Cigarette makers insist candy-flavored smokes are nothing more than a novel twist on tobacco aimed at adults.

Critics who gathered Sunday at the Chicago Children's Museum see this latest craze as something else: a shameless marketing ploy to hook young customers.

They called on Congress to give the Food and Drug Administration the authority to regulate tobacco and to ban the candy-flavored products, which smell and taste like sweets, come in brightly colored packages and go by names such as Twista Lime and Midnight Berry.

The flavored cigarettes are a "highly disturbing trend that shows the tobacco industry is still targeting our children," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), who was joined at a news conference by several public health experts.

The group lauded legislation that passed the U.S. Senate in July. That bill, unlike the House version, would grant the FDA broad powers over tobacco products and force cigarette companies to provide economic assistance to help farmers in the transition from growing tobacco.

"Almost everything Americans eat or drink is regulated by the FDA," said Joel Africk, chief executive officer of the American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago. "Yet a product that kills 400,000 Americans a year -- a product that contains arsenic, formaldehyde and other lethal poisons -- has so far escaped government oversight."

An official with R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, makers of several "exotic blend" cigarettes, scoffed at the notion that candy-flavored smokes are tailored to children. She noted that flavored cigarettes are almost twice as expensive as a regular pack.

"We're very keenly aware that children should not smoke," company spokeswoman Ellen Wallace said. "Our flavors are ones that have been designed and created for adults and tested on adults."

Another R.J. Reynolds official said the company opposes FDA regulation of tobacco for several reasons, including advertising restrictions that he said would make it "very difficult for us to attract adults smoking other brands."